

An Ceann Comhairle

Seomra 39
Foirgnimh na Parlaiminte
Baile Lios na Scáth
Cnoc an Anfa
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**First Minister & deputy First Minister
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1 April 2020

Dear Arlene and Michelle

Arrangements for the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 Response

Now that the Assembly has approved the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 Response, it is for me as its Chairperson to determine its procedures.

Essentially, the Ad Hoc Committee is the Assembly meeting as a committee and will resemble in many ways how Ministerial statements are taken during plenary sittings. In this respect, the Ad Hoc Committee is very different from a statutory committee. The guidance attached has therefore been developed for departmental officials on the detail of how the Ad Hoc Committee will work and I am copying this letter to all Ministers.

It is important that Ministers give me as much notice as possible if they wish to make a statement to the Members through the Ad Hoc Committee and a weekly indicative schedule from the Executive would be very helpful. However, as this mechanism has been developed as an agile means of responding to a fast moving situation, I know that there may be times when it is necessary to convene it at short notice. Unlike making a statement to a plenary sitting, the Ad Hoc Committee will only be convened if a Minister wishes to make a statement on a non-sitting day so I will require a reasonable period to give Members notice and ensure the necessary arrangements and staffing are in place.

As you are aware, the Ad Hoc Committee has come about following my discussions with Junior Ministers on behalf of the Executive. The Assembly has taken significant steps to ease pressure on departments at this difficult time, including suspending Question Time and discouraging Assembly Written Questions. However, the scrutiny role of the Assembly remains vital and this is a more flexible procedure through which to exercise it on the public health crisis.

I would therefore emphasise that in the absence of the routine of Question Times, it is important that the Executive takes a coordinated approach to ensure that all Ministers will use the Ad Hoc Committee to provide regular updates to Members on the Executive's response to COVID 19 and to take questions.

Finally, while the Assembly is formally entering a recess period, committees are always able to continue meeting during a recess and one of the agreed advantages in creating this mechanism was to ensure that Ministers could continue to appear in front of Members in the immediate time ahead.

At the Business Committee yesterday, all parties were agreed that it was vital for the public to see that the Assembly remains focused on the COVID 19 virus at this time and that it would be valuable for meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee to occur over the next two weeks. I think that is even more important given the public announcements by Ministers today that we are likely to be approaching the peak of the pandemic.

I would therefore expect to be required to convene meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee in the short time ahead.

Personal Data

ALEX MASKEY MLA

Cc Executive Ministers